

Spinoza

Theological-Political Treatise

PREFACE

¶1 {5} If human beings could regulate all their affairs¹ with certain² counsel,³ or if fortune were always favorable to them, they would not be bound⁴ by any superstition.

2 But since they are often reduced to such straits that they are unable to apply any counsel and—in view of the uncertain goods of fortune, which they long for without measure⁵—often vacillate miserably between hope and dread, they therefore have a psyche⁶ very prone to believing anything whatever. While it is in doubt, it is easily⁷ driven back and forth—and much more easily while it stays agitated by hope and dread; at other times⁸ it is overtrusting, boastful and proud.

3 [2] Yet I figure no one is ignorant of these things, though I believe that most are ignorant of themselves. For no one has lived among human beings who does not see that, in favorable situations, most of them are so overflowing with wisdom that even if they are very inexperienced they believe a wrong is done to them if someone wants to give them counsel. In adverse ones, however, they do not know⁹ where to turn, and seek counsel on bended knees from anyone; and nothing they hear is so idiotic, so absurd or vain, that they do not follow it. Furthermore, from even the slightest causes, they now hope for better things and again fear worse ones. For if while they are caught up in dread they see something happening which reminds them of any past good or evil,¹⁰ they deem that it announces an outcome either happy or unhappy: they call it a lucky or unlucky omen on that account, though it dupes

¹ The noun *res*—literally, “thing”—has a variety of connected meanings according to context, including “affair,” “concern,” “circumstance,” “event,” “interest,” “matter,” “reality,” “situation,” “undertaking.” Except for thirty-six instances (see Index of Terms, s.v. “thing”), *res* will always be translated by one of these words, and “things” will be saved as needed for Spinoza’s neuter plural adjectives or pronouns; or, alternatively, it will either share an English translation with some other Latin word—e.g. “point” (5.4.1, 2; 7.9.1; 17.6.3)—or else blend with some other word—e.g., “anything” (6.1.1, 21), “emergencies” (17.5.20), “commonwealth” (17.5.26). For an explanation of the citation format used in this translation, see the Translator’s Remarks.

² See Glossary, s.v. “certain.”

³ See Glossary, s.v. “counsel.” For the expression, cf. Terence, *Eunuch* 57-58.

⁴ This verb, the passive of *tenere* (“hold”), has the double meaning of being both duty-bound and constrained.

⁵ Lit.: mode. See Glossary, s.v. “mode.”

⁶ See Glossary, s.v. “soul.”

⁷ Lit.: with an easy movement. Cf. Terence, *Andria* 266. See also the account of vacillation in Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pt. III, Prop. 59 Scholium (trans. W.H. White [rev. ed.; New York: Hafner, 1967], 173f.).

⁸ Throughout the translation, a small circle occasionally added to a translated word or two indicates a translator’s interpolation.

⁹ In the translation that follows, this verb divides between *scire* (“know” in the scientific meaning of the term) and *cognoscere* (“know” in the broad meaning of the term). To see which is which in each instance, see the Index of Terms, s.v. “knowledge.” Both *scire* and *cognoscere* are distinct from *noscere* (“recognize”), *agnoscere* (“acknowledge”), *dignoscere* (“discern”), and *innotescere* (“become known”), respectively. Unless otherwise specified, “knowledge” is always *cognitio*, as opposed to *scientia* (“science”) or *notitia* (“acquaintance”).

¹⁰ Or: bad. Likewise throughout.

them a hundred times°.

4 [3] Besides, if they see with great wonderment something unusual, they believe it is a portent that indicates the anger of the Gods or of the highest¹¹ Deity; and so, being humans vulnerable to superstition and adverse to religion, they consider it an impropriety not to propitiate it with sacrifices and prayers. And in that mode they fantasize infinite things and interpret the whole of nature in amazing modes, as if it were going insane with them.

5 [4] When these things go on in that way°, therefore, we see especially that those who long without measure¹² for uncertain things are very addicted to every kind of superstition; and they all beg for divine help with prayers and womanish tears—mostly when they are caught in dangers and are unable to be of help to themselves—and call human wisdom vain and reason¹³ blind (since it is unable to show the certain way¹⁴ to the vain things they long for). And, on the other hand, they believe that hallucinations of the imagination, dreams and childish idiocies are divine answers—indeed, that God turns away the wise and has inscribed his decrees not in the mind but in the entrails of livestock, and that fools, madmen and birds predict them by divine inspiration and instinct.

6 Fear makes human beings go that insane.

7 [5] Accordingly, the cause {6} from which superstition arises, is preserved and is fostered, is dread. If anyone desires to know specific¹⁵ examples of this matter beyond what has already been said, let him look at Alexander, who from the superstition of his psyche began employing prognosticators¹⁶ when he first learned to fear fortune at the Gates of Susa (see Curtius V.4).¹⁷ Yet after Darius was conquered, he stopped consulting soothsayers and prognosticators until, terrified once more by the disequilibrium¹⁸ of the time—since the Bactrians had abandoned him and the Scythians were provoking a clash, while he himself lay stricken on account of a wound—*having, as Curtius himself asserts at VII.7,¹⁹ returned again to superstition, the laughingstock of human minds, he bids Aristander, whom he had told of his credulity, to explore the outcome of the matters with sacrifices.*

8 [6] And in this mode very many examples could be brought up which show the same thing as clearly as possible: that only while dread lasts do human beings struggle with superstition; that all the things they have ever worshiped²⁰ by vain religion have been nothing but phantasms and the hallucinations of a sad and fearful

¹¹ Wherever possible, the adjective *summus* will be translated “highest.” At times, however, it will be “utmost,” “overall,” “high” (as in “...pontiff”), “-in-chief” (as in “commander-...”). The corresponding noun, *summa*, is “sum.”

¹² Lit.: mode.

¹³ See Glossary, s.v. “reason.”

¹⁴ Cf. Glossary, s.v. “mode.”

¹⁵ Lit.: singular. Likewise throughout. Cf. note on “showy” at P.3.1.

¹⁶ See Glossary, s.v. “prophet.”

¹⁷ Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander* V.4.1.

¹⁸ Elsewhere: inequity.

¹⁹ *History of Alexander* VII.7.8.

²⁰ See Glossary, s.v. “worship.”

psyche; and, finally, that prognosticators have ruled among the plebs to the greatest degree, and have been formidable to their Kings to the greatest degree, in the greatest straits of the imperium.²¹ But inasmuch as I figure these things have been spread²² enough among everyone, I pass over them.

¶2 [7] Accordingly, from this cause of superstition, it clearly follows that all human beings are by nature vulnerable to superstition (whatever others say who deem that it arises in that all mortals have some confused idea of the deity).

2 It follows, furthermore, that it has to be quite variable and unsteadfast, as is every laughingstock of the mind and impulse to frenzy; and, finally, that it is defended with nothing but hope, hatred, anger and ruse. No wonder, since it does not arise from reason, but from emotion alone—and a very effective one at that.

3 [8] Accordingly, just as it becomes easy for human beings to be taken in by any kind of superstition, so it is hard, on the other hand, to make them persist in one and the same thing. Indeed, since the vulgar²³ always remain equally miserable, they therefore never acquiesce for long, but only what is new and has not yet duped them pleases them very much; indeed, this unsteadfastness has been the cause of many tumults and atrocious wars. For (as is obvious from what has just been said and as Curtius too, at IV.10,²⁴ has recognized very well) *Nothing regulates a multitude more effectively than superstition*. Hence it comes about that they are easily induced by a show of religion now to adore their Kings as Gods, and again to execrate and detest them as the common disease of the human race.

4 [9] That this evil might be avoided, therefore, immense study has been employed to embellish religion, true or {7} vain, with worship and pomp so that it might be taken more seriously²⁵ than any other^o motive and always be cultivated²⁶ by everyone with the utmost observance; at any rate, this has been granted most happily by the Turks, who consider it an impropriety even to dispute, and occupy each's judgment with so many prejudices that they leave no place in the mind for sound reason or for doubting anything.

¶3 [10] Be that as it may, if the highest secret of a monarchical regime, and its interest altogether, is to have human beings deceived and to cover up the dread by which they have to be restrained by the showy²⁷ name of Religion—so that they would fight for their servitude as though for their salvation²⁸ and would not deem it shameful, but the greatest glory, to spend blood and soul for the vanity of one

²¹ See Glossary, s.v. "imperium."

²² The Latin verb is akin to "vulgar" in P.2.3 and elsewhere. See Glossary, s.v. "vulgar."

²³ See the previous note.

²⁴ *History of Alexander* IV.10.7.

²⁵ More or less lit.: considered weightier.

²⁶ Or: worshiped. See Glossary, s.v. "worship."

²⁷ Or: specious. Unless otherwise indicated, *species* and its Latin cognate will always be translated as "show" and its English cognate. The reader, however, is invited to keep in mind as well the term's scientific meaning, which shows up in English as "species" (as at 4.1.1). At the risk of complicating matters here, for reasons of English idiom I have usually had to translate the Latin *singularis* and its Latin cognates as "special" and its English cognates. See Index of Terms, s.v. "show," "special."

²⁸ Or: welfare. See Glossary, s.v. "welfare."

P.3.2-4.1

human being—in a free republic, on the other hand, nothing can be devised or attempted more unhappily. For occupying each's free judgment with prejudices, or controlling it in any mode, conflicts altogether with the common freedom. [11] And as for the seditions that are aroused by a show of religion, they in fact²⁹ arise in that laws are set down concerning theoretical matters, and opinions are considered a crime and condemned as though they were wicked deeds—their defenders and adherents being sacrificed, not for the public welfare,³⁰ but only to the hatred and savagery of their adversaries.

2 But if on the basis of³¹ the right³² of the imperium only *what is done were reproved and what is said were said*° with impunity,³³ such seditions could not be embellished by any show of right, and controversies would not be turned into seditions.

3 [12] Accordingly, since this rare happiness has befallen us that we live in a Republic where each is granted the full freedom to judge, and to worship God on the basis of his own mental cast,³⁴ and where nothing is considered dearer or sweeter than freedom, I believed I would not be doing anything either unwelcome or useless by showing that not only can this freedom be granted in keeping with piety and the peace of the Republic, but moreover it cannot be removed unless along with that same Peace of the Republic and piety. [13] And this is the chief thing I have set out to demonstrate in this treatise. For this it has been necessary, first and foremost, to indicate the chief prejudices concerning religion—that is, the traces of ancient slavery—as well as the prejudices surrounding the right of the highest powers: many, with a most shameless license, are eager to seize this in great part and, by a show of religion, turn the spirit of the multitude—still vulnerable to the superstition of the Gentiles—away from them so that everything would once again sink into servitude.

4 In what order these things are shown, moreover, I will now say in a few words°. But first I will teach the causes that have driven me to write.

¶4 [14] {8} I had often wondered that human beings who boast that they profess the Christian religion—that is, love, gladness, peace, continence, and faith toward all—should clash in a more than inequitable spirit and exercise the bitterest hatred toward one another daily, so that each's faith is recognized more easily from the latter than from the former. For even now the matter has gone so far that you almost cannot recognize who anyone is—whether Christian, Turk, Jew, or Heathen—unless by the outward habit and worship of his body, or because he frequents this or that

²⁹ Except for this phrase, which will always translate the adverbial expression *profecto*, “fact” will serve exclusively as a circumlocution where needed to translate Spinoza's pronominal conjunctions.

³⁰ Or: salvation (as earlier in P.1.3). See Glossary, S.v. “welfare.”

³¹ See Glossary, s.v. “on the basis of.”

³² Or: jurisdiction. Spinoza assimilates *iur* (“right”) to *lex* (“law”); see, e.g., 4.1.1. Wherever “right” seems awkward in English, I have substituted “jurisdiction”—even though Spinoza himself occasionally uses two other words for this last (*dictio*, *iurisdictio*). In addition, there is the cognate term I have translated as “bidding” (*iussum*). For the full lists, see Index of Terms, s.v. “bidding,” “law,” “right.”

³³ Cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 1.72.

³⁴ See Glossary, s.v. “mental cast.”

Church, or, lastly, because he is addicted to this or that opinion and is accustomed to swearing in the words of some master or other°.

2 Otherwise life is the same for all.

3 [15] Seeking the cause of this evil, therefore, I did not doubt that it had arisen in that, for the vulgar, regarding the Church's ministries as entitlements and its duties as benefices, and holding pastors in the highest honor, were part° of religion. For as soon as this abuse began in the Church, right away there started in each of the worst of them° an immense lust to administer the sacred duties; and the love of propagating divine religion degenerated into sordid greed and ambition, and likewise the temple itself into a Theater where, not Church Teachers, but orators were heard, none of whom was bound by a desire for teaching the populace, but for carrying them off in admiration³⁵ for himself and picking at dissidents publicly and teaching only what was new and unusual and what the vulgar admired most. Hence, in fact, there had to arise great conflicts, envy, and a hatred that could not be calmed by any age.

4 [16] No wonder, therefore, that nothing remains of the ancient religion besides its outward worship (by which the vulgar seem more to flatter God than to adore him) and faith is now nothing else but credulity and prejudices—and what prejudices? Ones that render human beings from being rational³⁶ into beasts, inasmuch as they altogether impede each from using his own free judgment and discerning the true from the false, and seem as though they have been intentionally devised for extinguishing the light of understanding inwardly.

5 [17] Piety and religion, O immortal God!, consist in absurd secrets; and those who completely despise reason, and reject and turn away the understanding as by nature corrupt, are in fact believed to have a divine light: this is the most inequitable thing.

6 Surely if they as much as had even a spark of the divine light, they would not go insane so proudly, but would learn to worship God more prudently; and, on the other hand, they would excel the rest in love as they now do in hatred. Nor would they persecute with such a hostile spirit those who do not feel³⁷ as they do; but (if, at any rate, they feared for others' salvation and not for their own fortune {9}) they would pity them instead.

7 [18] Besides, if they had any Divine light, it would at least be established from their teaching. I confess that they could never wonder enough at the most profound mysteries of Scripture; and yet I do not see that they have taught anything besides the theories of Aristotelians and Platonists. Now they have accommodated Scripture to these, so as not to seem to be following after the Gentiles.

8 [19] It has not been enough for them to go insane with the Greeks, but they have wanted to have the Prophets obsess with them. Surely this shows clearly that they do not see the divinity of Scripture even through a dream. And the more

³⁵ The noun *admiratio* means both "admiration" and "wonderment" (as in P.1.4). Similarly, the verb *admirari*, later in Spinoza's sentence, means both "admire" and "wonder at." The twofold meaning may be intended by Spinoza, and I will occasionally call attention to future instances of it.

³⁶ Or: by rational means°. Cf. Glossary, s.v. "on the basis of."

³⁷ See Glossary, s.v. "think."

extravagantly they admire these mysteries, the more they show that they do not so much believe in Scripture as cater to it. This is also obvious in that many suppose as a foundation (for understanding it and extracting its true sense) that it is everywhere truthful and divine. Namely, the very thing that ultimately has to be established from an understanding of it and by strict examination, and which we are taught far better from what does not need human fantasies in the least, they state at the very outset as a rule for its interpretation.

¶5 [20] When, therefore, I weighed these things in my psyche—that the natural light is not only despised but condemned by many as the source of impiety, furthermore that human comments are taken for divine lessons, that credulity is regarded as faith, and that the controversies of Philosophers, and hence very savage hatreds and discords by which human beings are easily turned to seditions, are fomented in Church and in Court by the greatest stirrings of their psyches—and I noticed that very many other things arose which would be too long to narrate here, I painstakingly set about to examine Scripture anew in a full and free spirit³⁸ and to affirm nothing about it and admit nothing as its teaching which I was not taught by it very clearly.

2 [21] With this caution, I therefore contrived a Method of interpreting the Sacred scrolls³⁹ and, instructed in this, began before everything to question what Prophecy was, and for what reason God revealed himself to Prophets, and why they were accepted by God—whether it was on account of having grand thoughts about God and nature, or, in truth, on account of piety alone.⁴⁰

3 After I recognized these things, I could easily determine that the authority of the Prophets has weight only in what has to do with the conduct⁴¹ of life and true virtue. Otherwise their opinions touch us little.

4 [22] These things being known, I questioned further what it was on account of which the Hebrews⁴² were called God's chosen.⁴³

5 When I saw, however, that this was nothing else but that God chose for them a certain area of the world where they could live securely and advantageously, {10} I thereby learned that the Laws revealed by God to Moses were nothing else but the rights of a special⁴⁴ imperium of the Hebrews, and therefore no one besides them had to accept them. Indeed, even they were not bound by them unless their imperium was standing.

6 [23] Besides, so that I might know whether it could be concluded on the basis of Scripture that human understanding is by nature corrupt, I wanted to inquire whether the catholic Religion, or the divine law revealed through the Prophets and the Apostles to the human race as such, was anything else but what the natural light

³⁸ Or: psyche (as twice earlier in P.5.1).

³⁹ Or: volumes. Likewise throughout.

⁴⁰ See Ch. 1-2, below.

⁴¹ Or: use. Likewise throughout. See Index of Terms, s.v. "use."

⁴² See Glossary, s.v. "Hebrews."

⁴³ See Ch. 3, below.

⁴⁴ Or: specific. Lit.: singular. See note on "showy" at P.3.1.

also teaches;⁴⁵ and, furthermore, whether miracles happened contrary to the order of nature, and whether they teach God's existence and providence more certainly and more clearly than do the things we understand clearly and distinctly through their first causes.⁴⁶

7 [24] But when I found nothing in the things Scripture expressly teaches which did not agree with the understanding and nothing that conflicted with it, and I saw besides that the Prophets taught nothing but such simple things as could easily be grasped⁴⁷ by each, and then embellished them with a style and confirmed them with reasons by which the spirit of the multitude could be moved in the greatest degree to devotion toward God, I persuaded myself altogether that Scripture leaves reason absolutely free and has nothing in common with Philosophy; but the latter as well as the former stands on its own proper footing.

8 [25] That I might demonstrate these things apodictically and determine the whole matter, moreover, I show in what way Scripture is to be interpreted, and that its whole knowledge of spiritual matters has to be sought from it alone and not from what we know by the natural light.⁴⁸

9 Then I go on to show the prejudices that arose in that the vulgar (addicted to superstition just because they love the relics of time above eternity itself) adore the books of Scripture rather than the very Word of God.⁴⁹

10 [26] After these things, I show that the revealed Word of God is not some certain number of books, but a simple concept of the divine mind revealed to the Prophets: obeying God with a full spirit, by cultivating justice and charity.

11 Yet I show that this is taught in Scripture on the basis of the grasp and opinions of those to whom the Prophets and Apostles were used to preaching the Word of God: this they did so that human beings would embrace it without any conflict and with a full spirit.⁵⁰

12 [27] The fundamentals of faith being thereby shown, I finally conclude that the object of revealed knowledge is nothing besides obedience; and so, in its object as well as in its foundations and means, it is completely distinct from natural knowledge and has nothing in common with it; but each occupies its realm without any conflict {11} with the other, and neither has to serve as handmaid to the other.⁵¹

13 [28] Besides, since the mental cast of human beings is quite varied, and one acquiesces better in some opinions and another in others, and what moves one to religion moves another to laughter, I thereby conclude with^o what is said above: each is to be left the freedom of his own judgment and the power to interpret the foundations of faith on the basis of his own mental cast; and whether each's faith is pious or impious is to be judged by his works alone. So, therefore, everyone will be

⁴⁵ See Ch. 4-5, below.

⁴⁶ See Ch. 6, below.

⁴⁷ Lit.: perceived. Cf. Glossary, s.v. "perception."

⁴⁸ See Ch. 7-11, below.

⁴⁹ See Ch. 12, below.

⁵⁰ See Ch. 13-14, below.

⁵¹ See Ch. 15, below.

able to obey God with a full and free spirit, and justice and charity alone will be prized among everyone.

14 [29] After I have shown by these things the freedom that the revealed divine law grants to each, I proceed to the other part of the question. Namely, this very freedom can and even has to be granted in keeping with the peace of the republic and the right of the highest powers, and cannot be taken away without great danger to peace and great detriment to the whole Republic.⁵² To demonstrate these things, moreover, I begin from each's natural right—for it extends as far as each's longing and power⁵³ extends, and no one is bound by right of nature to live on the basis of another's mental cast, but each is the avenger of his own freedom.

15 [30] Besides, I show that no one really yields this right unless he transfers to another the power to defend himself; and the one to whom each has transferred his right to live on the basis of his very own⁵⁴ mental cast together° with his power to defend himself, necessarily retains this natural right absolutely. And hence I show that those who hold the highest imperium have the right to anything they can do, and alone are the avengers of right and freedom, whereas the rest have to do everything solely on the basis of their decree.

16 [31] But since no one can so deprive himself of his power to defend himself that he stops being a human being, hence I conclude that no one can be absolutely deprived of his natural right; but subjects retain, by the right of nature as it were, some things that cannot be taken away from them without great danger to the imperium; and so, either these things are granted to them tacitly, or they are expressly stipulated with those who hold the imperium.

17 These things being considered, I go on to the Republic of the Hebrews, which I describe at enough length to show how, for what reason and by whose decree Religion began to have the force of right, and also other things in passing which seemed worth the information.⁵⁵

18 [32] After these things, I show that those who hold the highest imperium are the avengers and interpreters not only of civil right but also of the sacred, and that they alone have the right to decree what is just, what is unjust, what is pious, and what is impious.⁵⁶ And ultimately I conclude that they retain that right best and {12} can preserve the imperium safely only if each is granted both to think what he wants and to say what he thinks.⁵⁷

¶6 [33] These things, Philosopher reader, are what I give you to be examined here;

⁵² See Ch. 16, below.

⁵³ Here "power" is *potentia*, rather than *potestas* as earlier in P.5.14. Traditionally, the former term means "potential" rather than raw undifferentiated "power," as wood has the "potential" to be a bed (cf., e.g., Aristotle, *Physics* 193a13); Spinoza, however, collapses the meaning of these two terms into one: "to be able to exist is power [*potentia*]" (*Ethics*, Pt. I, Prop. 11, "Another Demonstration"-II [trans. White, 48]). A translator's footnote will indicate whenever the two terms, blurred as they are in English translation, occur in close proximity. To tell in all instances which is which, see also Index of Terms, s.v. "power."

⁵⁴ Lit.: own proper.

⁵⁵ See Ch. 17-18 below.

⁵⁶ See Ch. 19, below.

⁵⁷ See Ch. 20, below, with Tacitus, *Histories* 1.1.

P.6.2-7.2

I am confident that they will not be unwelcome, in view of the preëminence and utility of the argument, both of the whole work and of each chapter. About these things I might add much, but I do not want this preface to grow into a volume,⁵⁸ especially since I believe the chief things have been recognized more than enough by Philosophers. Yet I am not eager to recommend this treatise to others; for nothing I might hope for could please them for any reason. For I have recognized how tenaciously those prejudices that the psyche has embraced by a show of piety stay on in the mind. Furthermore, I have recognized that it is equally impossible to take away superstition from the vulgar as to take away^o dread. Finally, I have recognized that the steadfastness of the vulgar is their^o stubbornness and that they are not regulated by reason, but are carried away by the impulse to praise or blame.

2 [34] Therefore, I do not invite the vulgar, and all who struggle with the same emotions as the vulgar, to read these things, since I would want them to neglect this book completely rather than become troublesome by interpreting it perversely—as they are used to doing with everything—and, while they in no way profit themselves, be an obstacle to others who would philosophize more freely if this one thing did not stand in the way^o: they deem that reason has to serve as handmaid to theology. For to the latter, I am confident this work will be useful through and through.

¶7 [35] Otherwise, since many will be likely to have neither the leisure nor the psyche to read everything through and through, I am compelled here too, as at the end of this Treatise, to admonish that I write nothing that I do not subject very readily to the examination and judgment of the highest Powers of my Fatherland. For if they judge that any of these things I am saying conflicts with the ancestral laws or is an obstacle to the common welfare, I myself would want that indicated.

2 I know I am a human being and could have erred. Yet I have been painstakingly careful not to err, and first and foremost in that whatever I wrote would altogether answer to the laws of the fatherland, to piety, and to good morals.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Or: scroll.

⁵⁹ Or: mores.